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The Polarity Fallacy

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In the preceding paper "Polar Terms and Interdependent Concepts" I attempted an elucidation of the concept of polar terms, and, indirectly thereby, of what is often called polarity. I argued that there are at least three different conceptions of polar terms, which I termed conceptual, existential, and epistemic, and defined as follows:

(a) Definition of "conceptually polar": A and B are *polar* iff the meaning of one involves the meaning of the other.

(a') Explication of *conceptually polar*: A and B are *conceptually polar* iff neither A nor B can be defined, explicated, understood, or conceived of without defining, explaining, understanding, or conceiving of the other, and neither can have a meaning unless the other has a meaning.

(b) Definition of "*existentially polar*": A and B are *existentially polar* iff it is impossible for an instance of one to exist unless there also exists some corresponding instance of the other.

(c) Definition of "*epistemically polar*": A and B are *epistemically polar* iff it is impossible for an instance of one to be ascertained, made out, discovered, or known without reference to the other.

It should be evident that the widest concept is conceptual polarity, while the strictest and narrowest is existential polarity, and that (b) implies (a) but not conversely. If two terms are existentially polar then they are conceptually polar; but terms can be conceptually polar without being existentially polar. Further, (c) implies (a) but not conversely. That is to say, if two terms are epistemically polar they must be conceptually polar, but not vice-versa. Yet there is a fairly widespread tendency – and one not peculiar to people altogether unfamiliar with philosophical discussions – to first, not notice the distinction, and second, as a consequence, to suppose that if two terms or concepts are polar then in order for an instance of one to exist, or to be made out or ascertained, there must exist an instance of the other. This is a fallacy which I hereby dub the polarity fallacy.

This fallacy is exemplified by Max Black's claim that "peace" and "war" are polar terms, while defining "polar words" as terms so related that "it is impossible for an instance of one to exist unless some corresponding instance of the other also exists", which implies that it is impossible for a state of peace to exist without there also existing a state of war.¹ It seems very likely (though I will not here take the trouble to explore the matter) that it is also exemplified in a work by Norman Malcolm, in which he observes, *inter alia*, that

Certain words of our language operate in pairs, e.g., "large" and "small", "animate" and "inanimate", "vague" and "clear", "certain" and "probable". In their use in ordinary language a member of a

pair requires its opposite — for animate is contrasted with inanimate, probability with certainty, vagueness with clearness.³

And the fallacy is also exemplified in the article on "The Ineffable" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* where it is said that "'Form' and 'content' ... are polar concepts; wherever there is form there must be content".⁴ This holds only if emptiness, or nothing, is allowed to count as content. Come back to Black for a moment. Black says (*op. cit.*, p. 46) that "Every stuff must have some shape, and every shape must be the shape of something, i.e., of some material or kind of material." But this confuses potentiality with actuality. There is no necessity for every shape to be the shape of an actual something — a given shape can be solely an abstraction, and not actually the shape of anything, that is, anything actual, and that means anything existing. So there is no existential polarity here, only conceptual. Black adds: "The pair of terms 'shape' and 'stuff' resemble such pairs as 'husband' and 'wife' or 'north' and 'south' ". That is true if the resemblance meant is conceptual polarity, not true if the resemblance is thought of as existential polarity. "Husband" and "wife" and "north" and "south" are existentially polar — the latter pair is indeed the paradigm case — "shape" and "stuff" are not.

Lacey's *Dictionary of Philosophy* defines "polar concepts" as follows:

Concepts which allegedly only have application if their opposites have application, e.g., good and evil, if it is true that there could be nothing good in the universe unless there were something evil for it to contrast with, and vice versa.⁵

Lacey, it is true, does not actually commit the polarity fallacy; note his use of "allegedly" and his saying "if it is true ..." Others, however, do, and the example Lacey uses is a prime case. Here is an example in which the fallacy is actually committed:

... all our cognitive experiences are based on contrast. Without darkness, we should not be able to understand what light is. If there were no such thing in existence as slavery, or imposition, or necessity, then the idea of freedom would have no meaning, would not exist.... Generally speaking, nothing can become an object of our cognitive experience if not contrasted with its opposite. Thus we can formulate the first principle determining reasoning in the following way: No concept, no judgment, no unit of thought has any meaning or logical value without its opposite, or, in other words, No units of thought exist and function otherwise than in pairs of opposites⁶

The idea that no unit of thought has any meaning without its opposite is in my judgment false, since I regard it as so dubious that every unit of thought must have an opposite, as our author believes. But that is not the concern here. The concern here is the polarity fallacy, which is not the idea that every idea has its polar opposite (though that is a worthy candidate for a similar title) but the inference that, because two ideas are so related that the meaning of one involves the meaning of the other, there cannot exist an instance of one unless there also exists an instance of the other. So we are told that unless there were slavery there could be no freedom, which is happily false. If we were merely being told

that we could not have the idea of freedom unless we had the idea of slavery (or necessity, etc.), that would be unexceptionable, but uninteresting. We can have the idea of slavery without there being slavery, and it is a good thing too. Otherwise we should have to regard tyrannical or slave states as really contributing to human good, since they provide us with the idea of freedom, which would be unavailable without them. In point of fact, slave states have existed, have existed recently, and still exist today, and there have been centers of freedom existing in the midst of or surrounded by centers of slavery. But we are here dealing with logic and conceptual possibility, not with historical development. We need models of good, we do not need models of evil. We can imagine them, and that is enough.

Here is another example:

...polarity means balance. And while each partner needs the other for its fullest development, yet each contributes something more in their union than the full development of the other; each adds some gift of its own not implicit in the partner....

Can either then exist *wholly* apart from the other, exist if the other does not exist? No. If it could, there would be no intrinsic or essential polarity in the situation. Take ... the case of the two hands. One hand, to be sure, may remain when the other is cut off; even so, the nerves in the amputated limb testify to the former presence of the latter, and the movements of the other are to an extent determined by what the lost member was accustomed to do. The influence persists as a guiding factor in the behavior of the remaining organ.... The polarity, still present — one hand so to speak wants the other — has to that degree become a lost ideal....⁶

There are a number of interesting ideas here, as there are in the book from which the passage is taken, but what is especially interesting in this context is that the passage commits the polarity fallacy. It is claimed that neither of two polar ideas can "exist wholly apart from the other". If I understand this at all, and I think I do, I understand it to mean *at least* that neither of two polar ideas can exist unless they both exist. This as we have already seen is false. To come back to hands, consider the situation of someone born with one hand missing. Here there has been no amputation, hence no "nerves in the amputated limb testifying to the former presence of the latter". Certainly it is better to have two hands than only one (and it might be even better to have three or four, though testimony on this is mixed), and there is no doubt a sense or a way in which each hand requires the other. This does not mean that if one hand has been amputated the amputated hand exists latently, since no longer actually, any more than it means that if one hand has been amputated the other is latently or potentially amputated, that it can no longer *really* exist or function since its partner no longer really exists or functions. Imagine a person with (in two senses) an amputated hand preserving the amputated hand in a special container which the person regularly revisits, as a sort of religious ritual, to replenish and preserve the functioning and being of the unamputated hand, and you have a picture conjured up by the view under consideration. Something here is baroque, all

right, and I suspect it is the theory that leads to this sort of imagination. If we shift the example away from hands, to something a bit handier, the point should be even more evident.

As already argued, two terms or concepts (I am not now talking about things already in existence) can be polar — the meaning of one can involve the meaning of the other in the sense explained in a' above — without it being necessary that for an instance of one to exist an instance of the other must also exist. But this account holds for terms or concepts, ideas or relations, and not for things already in existence. As Grant (*op. cit.*, note 4,) has convincingly shown (pp. 95-8), this is true with "convex" and "concave". Although these ideas are conceptually polar, there is no necessity that if one side of something is convex the other be concave; as Grant points out, it can be flat, or also convex. And the following are some further instances, argued for in "Polar Terms and Interdependent Concepts": *supply* and *demand*, *question* and *answer*, and also *teaching* and *learning*. There can be a supply of something without there being any demand whatever for it, as some entrepreneurs have found out to their discomfiture. And as people all over the world have found out and continue to find out, there can be a demand for something — food, clothing, shelter, freedom — without there being any supply of it available. To reply that if there is supply of something there must be a demand for something, even if not for it, is simply fatuous. And, though nothing can be an answer without there being some question it is an answer to ("answer" is in this way a relative term), there can be questions without answers, that is, correct answers as distinct from supposititious answers.⁷ Teachers find out all too early in their careers that there can be teaching without learning; and clearly there can be learning without teaching.

A standard move of undergraduates upon being confronted with the problem of evil is to argue that there cannot be anything good without there being anything evil, and that therefore God has created evil, or allowed evil to enter the world, so that human beings could by the contrast thus obligingly provided know what is good, and thus presumably follow what is good and eschew evil. But there is no necessity for evil to exist in order for us to know what is good. If comparison and contrast is necessary, as it may be, it can be supplied by description or imagination. There is no need, at least on these grounds, for evil to be, and the move just described is a paradigm case of the polarity fallacy. Even "thinkers", in the Bradleyian sense, have committed this fallacy, continue to do so. By the same token, there is no need for there to be instances (as distinct from constructed examples) of fallacious reasoning in order for us to recognize, and to teach others to recognize, good reasoning. Just so, there is no need for evil to be.⁸ Children get the idea of the boogeyman (defined — and spelled as just spelled — in the *Random House Dictionary* as "an imaginary evil character of supernatural powers, esp. a mythical hobgoblin supposed to carry off naughty children") even though they never run across him, though they do unfortunately run across people like him, such as people who frighten children by telling them lies about the boogeyman. (There is nothing paradoxical about "The Abominable Snowman does not exist", though it may not be especially comforting —

there are worse evils that do.) And we can have the idea of the supernatural — otherwise we could not understand the definition just given, and we do — whether it exists or not. The situation is the same with magic — we can have the idea of magic without ever experiencing an actual confirmed instance of it and without believing that there can be any genuine instances. The same points apply to polar ideas, supernatural or not. It seems clear, then, to recur to the quotation from Lacey, that words or terms or concepts can have meaning without having what Lacey called “application”. Of course, this point has been known for a long time. Words can have meaning without denoting, sense without reference, *und so weiter*. It is only the terminology — “having application” — that is different here. The same holds true, *mutatis mutandis*, for polar words or terms or concepts.

I conclude with a passage from another *Dictionary of Philosophy*, that of Peter Angeles, where the polarity fallacy is actually committed and the mistaken conception of polarity that leads to it is overt and explicit:

When one member of a polarity is thought to exist, ontological status is usually also affirmed for its contrasting member. Examples: Light cannot exist without the existence of darkness. Love cannot exist without hate existing. If good did not exist in reality, then there would be no evil.’

The first statement here is true: when one member of a polarity or polar pair is thought to exist, existence is “usually also affirmed for its contrasting member”. But the examples — two of which should have a certain familiarity — show nothing. Why cannot light exist without darkness? We can imagine a world in which there is light all over all the time. We might not be able to make it out or realize it if there were no darkness to contrast it with. If true, this would show that *light* and *darkness* are *epistemically* polar, but not that they are *existentially* polar. And why cannot love exist without hate existing? A world in which everyone loved, if not everyone then at least someone, and in which no one hated anyone, is surely conceivable. It is true that we contrast love and hate, and all too often, as psychologists observe, one merges into or gives way to the other. But this is evidence that love and hate are *conceptually* polar, not that they are *polar existentially*. “If good did not exist in reality, then there would be no evil”? This sounds very like saying that good is the cause of evil, as one might say that marriage is the cause of divorce because if there were no marriage there could be no divorce. But it is no better than the view considered before. I am not sure that the statement actually provided is the one the author really wanted, since it does not say what is more typically said, that if there were no evil there could be no good, but it makes no real difference. The statement in question (“If good did not exist in reality, then there would be no evil”) is equivalent as contrapositive to “If there is evil, then good must exist in reality”. Of course, both do exist, but neither exists necessarily [actually, nothing exists necessarily — which is not equivalent to “NOTHING exists necessarily”], nor does the existence of one require the existence of the other. I have already argued and do not think further argument is needed to show further that there is no necessary ontological connection between good and evil, whichever is taken

as primary. Good and evil are conceptually polar, perhaps epistemically polar, but not existentially polar. The supposition that they are instantiates the polarity fallacy.

Notes

- ¹ Max Black, *Critical Thinking* (2nd ed.; New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952), pp. 211, 443, 46.
- ² Norman Malcolm, "Moore and Ordinary Language", in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1942), p. 364.
- ³ W. E. Kennick, "The Ineffable", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press, 1967), vol. 4, p. 183.
- ⁴ A. R. Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), p. 163. Lacey cites as authority C. K. Grant, "Polar Concepts and Metaphysical Arguments", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, LVI, 1955-6.
- ⁵ Boris B. Boguslavsky, *The Technique of Controversy* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1928), p. 118, with italics in original omitted here.
- ⁶ Wilmon H. Sheldon, *God and Polarity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 675. Sheldon's definition of polarity, for which he does not claim precision, is "roughly as follows ... one or another phase, aspect, relation, event or entity and its counterpart, each peculiar to the other alone, its counterpart; the two opposite as it were in direction, in way of acting, yet each capable of fruitful cooperation with the other, also of opposing, denying or frustrating it, having thus a degree of independence and a being of its own, and between the two a trend or lure to cooperation in which one of the partners takes the initiative and the other responds, yet each freely... The definition may be illustrated with a fair degree of precision by man's two hands, these forming a natural pair..." (p. 674). Sheldon adds (p. 675) that "the very meaning of polarity [is] to permit a varying degree of independence and even of correspondence ... and this means some looseness ... precision is the idol of the exclusive intellect ... 'I hope I have not misrepresented Sheldon in the passage used in the text. That is certainly a possibility. It would appear from the definition just reproduced that polarity on his account is defined as existential, since he is talking or means to be talking about reality. "The pairing principle", he says, "pervades reality". His emphasis is metaphysical; mine is logical. I point out only that metaphysics is, or ought to be, subordinate to logic. But perhaps metaphysics and logic are related in polar fashion. If so, on which conception of polarity?"
- ⁷ Here is a nice example just come to hand: "Some questions, even though they can never be answered, constantly recur, and deserve attention. That is true of a question I have been asked repeatedly since Dallas: Would Kennedy have handled Vietnam the same way Johnson did? Obviously, history does not allow us to test such alternatives; one must rely on one's instincts" (Clark Clifford, with Richard Holbrooke, "Serving the President", *The New Yorker*, April 1, 1991, p. 73). Other examples are easily supplied. It might be thought that all that this passage illustrates is a question that we cannot answer, to which, in other words, the answer cannot be known, but from the fact that the answer to a given question cannot be known it does not follow that there is no right answer. The logic here is sound, but the topic is large, so I content myself here merely with pointing out that the question quoted is quite different in form from such a question as "Was it Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone who killed John F. Kennedy, or was Kennedy killed by

someone else, or was there a conspiracy?" This latter question now cannot be answered with certainty since the evidence has become so stale and the question has become so politicized. Yet clearly there is a right answer, even though we cannot ever know what it is. This same point, that there clearly is a right answer, is not so obvious with respect to counterfactual questions about historical matters.

- I am grateful to Georges Dicker for persuading me, as he did I think unconsciously, that this point about the polarity fallacy was worth making separately, especially in relation to the ideas of good and evil, outside the immediate context of "Polar Terms and Interdependent Concepts".
- Peter Angeles, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p. 215.